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A LOCAL CUSTOM

Middlebury graduates 600

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MIDDLEBURY -- Cheers and applause greeted roughly 600 graduating Middlebury College students as they marched from their seats to the Mead Memorial Chapel shortly after receiving their diplomas Sunday morning.

The graduating class elected Lauren Curatolo, the Class of 2006's only Women's and Gender Studies major and a self-described "raging feminist," to speak during the commencement ceremony.

"We are here today to receive a symbol of our achievement and success," she said, calling on her fellow graduates to enjoy life's ride. "Embrace the journey. Stay true to your resolve," she said. "Escape society's pressures that encourage uniformity."

International studies major Anna Marks of Ithaca, N.Y., said Curatolo's speech had "the right mixture of comedy and inspiration." This summer, Marks, 22, plans to travel to Costa Rica to guide high school students through a language immersion program. In the fall, she is hoping to join AmeriCorps.

Ann Veneman, the executive director of UNICEF, the United Nation's children's agency, gave the formal commencement speech and encouraged students to work for people all over the world and appreciate their parents' sacrifices to send them to Middlebury.

"They are sometimes overlooked, except when the tuition is due," Veneman said.

"Your education is just beginning. You are now on a playing field that is populated by people all over the globe. Globalization is not a prediction. It's a reality.

"Your competition is no longer the person across town. It's the woman in China, the man in India. Like Columbus, you find yourselves in a new world. And it is one filled with tremendous opportunities."

The problems of the world "sometimes seem insurmountable," she said, noting the 1 billion people who live on less than \$1 per day and the millions of children who die each year from preventable causes.

Faced with these problems, she said, there are two options: despair or determination.

Veneman called upon the graduates to fill their lives with helping people and gaining knowledge "rather than have it drained by ignorance."

After Veneman was announced as the speaker in March, 19 professors wrote a letter to Middlebury's student newspaper, The Campus, outlining their concerns about the choice of Veneman. The professors objected to Veneman's role as secretary of agriculture for President George W. Bush. Despite the objections, there was no apparent protest during Sunday's

commencement.

During the presentation of the honorary degrees, many cheered when the decision of Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., to bolt the Republican Party in 2001 to become an independent was mentioned.

On the way to his car, Jeffords said receiving the honorary degree was overwhelming and said today's graduates will face a trying time.

"There's a lot of things going to change quickly," the retiring senator said. "The world is in somewhat of a mess."

After the ceremony had ended, international politics and economics major Nick Secara of Scranton, Pa., expressed surprise that his time at Middlebury was over.

"I can't believe four years have already flown by."